

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Mandatory Physical Fitness Programs in
Law Enforcement**

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ABSTRACT

Mandatory physical fitness programs for law enforcement is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because officers often have to perform some type of physical fitness test or evaluation prior to being hired by a law enforcement agency. Too often, once the officer starts his or her career, they do not stay physically fit. The way the public views officers has changed over the years. Television programs often show overweight, out of shape officers. Officers that are physically fit are more confident about their ability to handle the job (Moore, 2006). Physically fit officers are less apt to be involved in a "use of force" situation than an overweight, out of shape officer (The Cooper Institute, 2002).

The purpose of this research is to show that a mandatory physical fitness program will benefit the Corinth Police Department and its officers and motivate them to stay in shape. This will reduce the use of sick time, provide better health for the individual officer, and will decrease the chance of injury. Working out on a regular basis will also serve as a way to reduce stress levels. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included Internet articles, periodicals, and a survey of officers.

The researcher discovered that younger officers were very positive about the mandatory program. Officers were also more than willing to participate if given time to work out on duty. Older officers were a little more resistant, but if given time on duty to work out, they were willing to do so as well.

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INTRODUCTION

Most police departments today have some type of physical fitness evaluation during the hiring process. Unfortunately, most departments do not require officers to stay in shape, nor do they have any physical fitness requirements after the officer is hired that follows throughout the officer's career. Officers cannot leave anything to chance. Not only have criminals been working out themselves, but they now have high-tech weapons (Moore, 2006). Repeat offenders are working out in jail at the taxpayers' expense. Police officers today need to be in better shape than the average civilian. Some departments make facilities available for officers to work out and stay in shape; however, not all officers see the advantages of being physically fit and do not take advantage of these facilities. In the past, the Corinth Police Department has given officers one hour of their shift for three days a week to work out (manpower permitting), but the program is not mandatory. Currently, officers do not have to pass a physical ability test once they are hired. Incumbent officers should have to pass the test on an annual basis.

Physical fitness has life-altering effects on the recipient. The purpose of this research is intended to show the benefits of physical fitness in law enforcement, not only for the recipient, but for the department as well. Not only can it be beneficial for the officer to be required to attain a level of physical fitness for hiring, it can also be beneficial for the officer to be required to maintain that level of fitness after hiring. The research question to be examined considers whether mandatory fitness programs, after the officer is hired, benefit the officer and the department.

The inquiry methods of this research will include personal interviews, magazine articles, and medical publications on health benefits. A survey of officers in the Corinth Police Department will also be completed. It is anticipated that research will show that mandatory physical fitness programs will make officers more mentally alert and physically able to perform all aspects of the job. A physically fit officer is also less likely to be injured on the job and, generally, has reduced stress levels in his or her life.

The law enforcement community can benefit from the research by implementing the standards provided for a mandatory physical fitness program. All officers, and the department as a whole, will greatly benefit by implementing a mandatory physical fitness program. Any officer will be better equipped mentally and physically to handle whatever challenge comes his or her way in the community they serve.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A person's physical well being is important to his or her performance no matter what occupation he or she chooses in life. However, there are some careers that require one to be in better physical shape than others. Law enforcement is, without a doubt, one of those careers. A person does not have to be overweight to be unfit. However, many individuals who are not physically fit are, indeed, overweight. A large portion of being physically fit is maintaining a reasonable weight. Obesity is a concern among Americans, and this is a concern in the law enforcement realm as well. Seventy-five law enforcement executives and other professionals were surveyed with a body mass index assessment. Of those surveyed, 80% of the respondents were classified as overweight, with one-third identified as obese (Shell, 2005). According to

the American Obesity Association, more than one-third of all adults are affected by obesity (Rivera, 2001).

Obesity can affect a person's quality of life as well as their emotional outlook on life. A police officer's stress level and occupational hazards can be high enough without the added stress of a potentially controllable condition such as obesity. Obesity can also affect a person's sleep pattern and create other impairments. A person who is hired to protect and serve should strive to keep any unnecessary impairment to a minimum.

It goes without saying that the law enforcement profession has many inherent dangers. It is also obvious that this career encompasses many physical activities. As a police officer, a person can be expected to act quickly and must be alert to unexpected dangers. There are even more dangers imposed when an officer is obese or out of shape. An observation made by Officer Susan D'Ambrose with the Monmouth County, New Jersey police academy is that an officer who is obese might not be able to catch up with a suspect in a foot pursuit. She goes on to observe that even if he were able to apprehend the suspect, due to his physical condition, he could have a heart attack (Rivera, 2001). This may sound like a blunt observation, but in a profession such as law enforcement, a person's physical well being can certainly be put to the test.

The benefits of being physically fit are inarguable. The average person would agree that physical fitness does more good to the body and lifestyle than being unhealthy and unfit. However, individuals, including law enforcement personnel, are, many times, less motivated to remain physically fit despite the known benefits and advantages. One third of the adults in the United States are considered obese (Air Force Print News Today, April 2009). Police officers should be fit enough to handle

whatever situation arises while they are on duty. They should be able to protect themselves and the public they serve.

There are many critics of all professions, and the law enforcement arena certainly has its share of those who would be quick to judge. James J. Ness, Ph.D. and director of criminal justice programs at Barton County Community College in Kansas, reported, "Many police officers consider themselves invincible because they are the police and they are confident that their training with firearms will resolve the majority of situations" (Ness, 1992, p 75). Ness (1992) discussed a study, which found that when asked to rate the importance of officers' training and their abilities, the officers felt that they were adequate in their firearm ability but lacking in their physical activity training. Another study by Ness (1992), with the same results, emphasized that there is more focus on firearms training than on physical fitness training. While the use of firearms is sometimes warranted in law enforcement, more times than not, the need for physical ability and mental alertness is more important and vital to perform at a professional and expected level. The use of deadly force in apprehending a fleeing, non-dangerous felon is restricted by the 1985 Supreme Court ruling in *Tennessee v. Garner* (Ness, 1992).

Most police officers are willing to be physically fit and certainly understand the benefits of physical fitness. However, many officers have reasons or excuses as to why they are not in shape. One of the reasons is time. When an officer leaves his shift, there are many responsibilities at home that draw him or her away from the need to participate in a fitness program or workout schedule. Mandatory fitness requirements would be trying on an officer who has little time outside of work to obtain or maintain a superior level of fitness. However, law enforcement officers should consider and

accommodate the need to be physically fit. The implementation of a fitness program within the department would encourage and motivate officers to approach physical fitness with a positive attitude. It is easier to get involved in a workout program if the facilities are made available and the time is appropriate for accommodating a busy lifestyle.

The need to be physically fit as a law enforcement officer is not a recent idea, nor is the desire by officers to be physically fit. In fact, a study conducted in 1976 by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration surveyed over 1,900 officers, and 90% of the officers were in favor of a department sponsored physical fitness program (as cited in Ness, 1992). Another study, conducted ten years later by the Federal Bureau of Investigation training division surveyed 2,497 United States police agencies and found that maintaining an appropriate level of physical fitness ranked second only to handling stress for programs requested by police officers (as cited in Ness, 1992). As mentioned previously, many stress related issues in the law enforcement profession could be caused by situations arising while trying to perform a task the police officer is not physically prepared to handle.

Knowing the officers would be willing to participate in a physical fitness program is just the underlying foundation for implementing such a program. In order for the program to be successful, careful planning and attention to detail is necessary. One such important detail is the legality of mandatory physical fitness programs. Many police departments and agencies are aware of, and maybe even threatened by, the requirements imposed by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Civil Rights Act of 1991. Both of these acts aim at eliminating discrimination, particularly in the

employment realm. More specifically, according to Brooks (2001), this federal legislation “requires that all employers of more than 15 employees must refrain from policies and procedures that either expressly or effectively discriminate against specified categories of individuals except under limited circumstances” (p. 26). This issue was brought to light in the *Lanning V. Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)* court case. This Pennsylvania case involved SEPTA’s implementation of physical fitness requirements for its police officers, both applicants and current officers. The most argued requirement was that the applicants run 1.5 miles in 12 minutes. If the applicant failed to perform at this level, he or she was not hired. This brought about the issue of disparate impact on women when compared to the same standard affects on men. SEPTA also tested the incumbent officer. The officer’s union filed a grievance and SEPTA stopped disciplining officers for not passing the physical fitness test but instead rewarded the officers who met the fitness requirements (Brooks, 2001).

The public’s perception of their local police agency is important in gaining cooperation, support, and public funding for police agency programs. When the public sees that the officers who are defending, protecting, and maintaining order in their communities are motivated and dependable, they are more likely to cooperate, support, and back the department. A law enforcement officer who is physically fit has an immeasurable advantage over less fit officers. The police officer is expected to be in a physical condition to perform pursuits, officer backups, officer assists, and arrests (Brooks, 2001). While all these areas of job performance are important, the officer’s own safety is of equal importance. The police officer is not simply expected to go out in the public to protect and serve without being properly equipped. This equipment could

include firearms, protective clothing, and other tangible devices. But, perhaps the most important piece of equipment is intangible, physical ability. As discussed by Trooper Schulz, it is very hard for someone in poor condition to implement self-defense tactics. Self-defense is of utmost importance in an officer's job functions (Rivera, 2001). As mentioned previously, the law enforcement officer needs to be in superior shape in order to handle the unforeseen occurrences that he can face in a given day on the job. One study by Ness (1992) found that "due to largely poor diet and lack of exercise, a significant sample of American police possessed a body composition and general level of physical fitness greatly inferior to that of a similar sized sample of convicts" (p. 74).

Law enforcement departments that encourage and offer physical fitness programs and standards find many benefits. The Cooper Institute (2002) mentioned another important reason for being concerned about the fitness of officers is that it minimizes the risk of excessive force situations. The department is accountable for the actions of its officers and is influential in forming public opinion. Excessive force might be used when an officer is not physically fit enough to handle the situation without undue force. Another important benefit for the department is less risk of injury to an officer who is physically fit. This benefit speaks for itself in that no employer likes to see an employee injured on the job, especially injuries that could be avoided from a precautionary practice, such as exercise or diet.

The education and knowledge that physical fitness is important is often taught and displayed to new recruits and is stressed in the academy. It is after the academy and in the everyday schedule of the officer where support and reminders of the physical fitness benefits are essential. Many departments have used various means to

implement and support a physical fitness program. The New Jersey State Troopers (NJST) is one such department that offers support to their officers for the physical fitness challenge, but it also expects accountability from its officers. This department has a physical fitness test, and officers are expected to maintain the same standards throughout their careers. They even have the same standards for officers of every rank and age. The NJST bases its fitness program on the “good living triangle – nutrition, resistance training, and aerobic conditioning” (Rivera, 2001, p. 81).

Another department that assists its officers is the Asbury Park Police Department. Although this department does not have its own physical fitness facility, it takes a portion of the Police Benevolent Association (PBA) dues to purchase gym memberships at a local facility. The Belmar Police Department has their own gym on their premises, which gives the officers the ability to work out in a convenient location after they get off work. This department gives a physical exam once a year and offers monetary rewards for performance (Rivera, 2001). Another department, Freehold Boro Police Department, gives officers time on duty to work out. Regardless of the department’s method or facilities for working out, the important factor is that the department is concerned with the physical fitness of its officers and offers some type of accountability program in the physical fitness area. The ideal program would include a fitness facility on the premises and time for officers to work out during their paid shift.

METHODOLOGY

The research question to be examined considers whether mandatory physical fitness programs in law enforcement are beneficial to the Corinth Police Department and to the individual officer. The researcher hypothesizes that given time while on duty

and the appropriate equipment, most officers would welcome a mandatory physical fitness program. The method of inquiry will include: A review of articles and periodicals relating to physical fitness in law enforcement, and the training manual from The Cooper Institute. Surveys will also be filled out by the officers and administration of the Corinth Police Department. The survey will specifically ask if officers believe there should be physical agility tests for officers after they are hired. The survey will also ask if officers believe the physical fitness tests should be mandatory. Currently, officers are allowed one hour on duty to work out. The survey will ask officers if they frequently take advantage of that one hour to work out and if they think it should be mandatory. The survey will further ask if officers believe they should be held to the same standard whether or not they are male or female. Finally, the survey will ask if officers are planning to start some type of physical fitness program on their own outside of the department.

The survey will be a questionnaire consisting of 11 questions and will be completed by officers of all divisions of the Corinth Police Department, administration, support, and operations. Thirty-one questionnaires were distributed and 28 were returned. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed to see if the administration and the officers of the department are on board and willing to implement the mandatory physical fitness program. Input from all officers and administration will be analyzed to find a successful way to implement the program if feasible.

FINDINGS

More than half of the officers surveyed stated that having the on-duty time to work out was important. The officers also stated that having time on-duty would

definitely give them the incentive to work out. The research showed that, with the individual officer's life being so busy, it was hard to take time away from family to work out. Another obstacle was taking time away from extra duty jobs to work out. Finding time seemed to be a huge obstacle for the individual officers. Officers that already work out stated they would work out even if the department did not give them time. The officers that already work out stated it would be beneficial to have time on duty to work out. On the other hand, looking at it from the stance of the department, it was difficult to meet minimum staffing requirements if officers were allowed off to work out while on duty. The administration was only willing to give on-duty time to work out on a limited basis. Not all officers would be able to work out at the same time.

The research showed that officers, nationwide, use less sick time and are injured less when they are in shape. This also held true with the Corinth Police Department. The officers that are in shape tend to call in sick less often. In fact, one officer had stayed on the clock even when he did not feel well so that he could work out with his workout partner after they got off. He did not want to miss his workout. This validated that the officer's fitness was extremely important to him. The department benefited from him staying at work and not having to call another officer in on overtime to cover the sick time that would have been used.

Of the 29 officers polled from the ages of 26 to 40 years old, 55% were excited about the idea of a mandatory program. This would "force" them to stay motivated and stay in shape. Most of the officers like to work out, and this was more of an incentive. The resistance came from the older officers. Ten percent of the officers were over the age of 45 and felt they should not have to meet the same standards as the younger

officers. One officer over the age of 45 felt they should be tested and should have to meet the same requirements as younger officers.

All officers in the survey responded well to having a department trainer available. Officers liked the idea and seemed to be even more motivated by possibly receiving extra vacation time for staying in shape. Eighteen percent of officers who really had not worked out in their life stated they would take full advantage of the training program. Ninety-seven percent of the officers agreed that physical fitness was important in law enforcement. Nine percent of the officers stated they would not work out unless the program was mandatory. Different officers surveyed were motivated by different things. Eighteen percent of the officers that currently do not have a workout program were motivated by the extra time off, being able to work out on duty, or wanted incentive pay. Twenty-one percent of the officers that are already participating in their own workout program needed little motivation but welcomed the time off or other reward. Seventy-five percent of the officers that stated they worked out on a regular basis would welcome a "Physical Fitness Award." Three percent of the officers stated they had no interest in any kind of award and would not work out. Twenty-five percent of the officers that stated they would participate in the award advised they welcomed the competition and considered an award of that caliber to be prestigious.

Of all the officers polled, 96% of the officers agreed they could do their job better and would benefit from being in better shape. The officers stated they would benefit from the physical fitness program and agreed working out was a stress relief. Officers agreed physical fitness was paramount in law enforcement, and all officers should strive to be in better shape. Ninety-six percent of the officers stated that they had been in

incidents in the past where being in better shape would have benefited them. This was interesting since the vast majority of officers agreed fitness was nothing but a benefit; however, 3% of the officers still flatly refused to start some type of program even if motivated by incentive pay or incentive time off.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether a mandatory physical fitness program would benefit the Corinth Police Department and its officers. The purpose of this research was to show the benefits and importance of the mandatory physical fitness program. The research revealed how a mandatory program could benefit the department and its officers by reducing sick time and improving the health of each individual officer. The research also proved officers would be receptive to working out and staying in shape if they were allotted the time and facilities to work out. The research question that was examined focused on the benefits, difficulties, and obstacles associated with a mandatory physical fitness program. Although the implementation of the program would be difficult, it would benefit the officers. The research showed that if officers were allowed to work out on duty they would probably do so. This was especially relevant if they had to take an annual physical fitness test. It seemed only the motivated officers would work out because they wanted to. The rest would only work out if they had to pass the testing.

The researcher hypothesized that if given time and a place to work out on duty, the officers and the administration would welcome and implement a physical fitness program. The researcher concluded from the findings that officers were, for the most

part, willing to work out and, if given time, would do so without resistance. They could see the benefits of being in shape, both on duty and off.

The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the fact that if the fitness requirements were mandatory and the officers had to pass a test as a condition of continued employment, they would do so to keep their jobs. Only four officers polled stated they would only work out as a condition of employment, the other officers stated they either work out now or would start a work out program and get in shape just to benefit themselves and the department. The biggest issue for the individual officer was having time on duty to work out. The biggest issue for the Corinth Police Department was having the manpower and staffing to allow officers time to work out on duty.

The administration supported the officers working out on duty. However, this would be on a very limited basis. The administration stated they did not want to make the physical fitness test mandatory for incumbent officers. The reason for this is the administration felt an officer may be punished for not passing the agility test if he or she had some type of injury. Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because of the small amount of surveys. The study of mandatory physical fitness programs in law enforcement is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because officers continue to be out of shape, while the average criminal that law enforcement deals with is in better shape (Ness, 1992). Officers need to be reminded every day that this job can get physical, and they need to be one step ahead of the general public and be able to handle whatever comes their way. Officers are always updating and training for new laws and procedures, but, somehow, physical training is often overlooked.

Officers from all departments should benefit from the research. It showed some ups and downs and difficulties of making a physical fitness program mandatory. If the program is successful, the benefits are immeasurable. Fit officers use less sick time, are more respected by the public, and are less prone to “use of force” incidents. The officers that are fit are often more beneficial to the department as they use less sick time and tend to be injured less. In the event of injury, someone in shape will often be able to return to work sooner than a less fit officer. It also shows how officers that are in shape are generally under less stress and, on average, live longer, healthier lives.

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APPENDIX

Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions and return the survey to me. Please be honest in your answers. This questionnaire is to complete my Administrative Research Paper for LEMIT. Please return to me as soon as possible.

Thank you for your time.

Sergeant Tyson

1. Currently our department requires recruits to pass a physical ability test prior to being hired. Do you think existing officers should be tested once a year?

2. Do you think a physical fitness test should be mandatory for all of Law Enforcement?

3. If you were allowed to work out on duty would you participate?

4. Are you currently involved in any type of workout program? If so what type?

5. Do you currently take advantage of the 1 hour a shift to work out (manpower permitting)?

6. Do you plan on starting a workout program in the future? If so what type?

7. Do you think if you were in better shape you could perform your duties better?

8. Do you think male and female officers should be held to the same standard?

9. Besides the On-Duty time to work out, what incentive could the department give you to work out?

10. Do you believe the department supports physical wellness?

**11. Current assignment;
Support ()**

Admin ()

Operations ()